

Tips on Plot Development

Verisimilitude. (Now there's a fancy Latin word for ya.) There's a strange contradiction every writer has to deal with when writing fiction: on the one hand, the story is completely made up, on the other, it has to have elements of truth in to make sense to the reader. What does this mean exactly? It means your story has to have "verisimilitude." Verisimilitude is a fancy Latin word I didn't learn about until my third year of college. It simply means "something that has the appearance of being true or real." When you think about what characters will do in your story, you must come up with things that make sense for who those characters are, what they want, and the world they live in. Once you establish the basic premise of your story — the nature of your characters and their conflicts, the particulars of your setting, etc. — your readers form expectations that your story must live up to regarding how things will proceed. Most of these expectations come from what readers know about life. So, in order to be successful, your story doesn't have to be true, but it does have to be true to life.

Don't make the plot too complicated. There's a temptation when you're sketching out the plot of a story to make it long and complicated with many surprising twists and turns. We all want to do this because this is what we experience in the books we love to read. But here's something important to consider: the average novel is 100,000 words long; many are over 200,000. Do you really want to write this much? Most writers don't. Think of writing a short story instead of a novel and plan your plot accordingly. Keep things tight. You can bring in a surprise here and there but you probably can't develop several sub-plots or take any significant excursions from the main storyline. In general, it is much better to have just a few important scenes with lots of detail than it is to have a long, drawn out story with dozens of things happening that aren't closely connected or well explained.

Is it funny or is it silly? I have noticed a tendency on the part of some writers to put crazy things into the plots of their stories. My hunch is that they are trying to be funny when they do this, but they end up being silly instead. Funny is good, everybody likes funny. Silly is not good. When you put silly things in your story, your readers get annoyed; they feel like you are wasting their time. Sometimes it's hard to know if something you're doing is funny or silly. Here's a good way to tell the difference: When you do something funny, people laugh at you. When you do something silly, you laugh at yourself.

Use the Transition-Action-Details strategy. A great strategy to use for developing the plot of your story is Transition-Action-Details. Start in the first "Action" box with the first scene in your story. Put the last scene in the last "Action" box. Then fill up the middle. When you have all the scenes you want in just the right order, add a couple of important details and perhaps a simple transition or two.

Example

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
In the fall,	Jeremy learns from his Uncle Edward that the U.S. Junior Chess Open tournament is being held in a city just a few hours from where he lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeremy is not sure he's good enough but his Uncle encourages him. • He doesn't think his parents will let him go.
A few days later,	Jeremy talks with his parents to ask if he can play in the tournament and if they will take him to the city to be in it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They ask him a lot of questions about it. It's during spring break. • His father thinks it's OK but his mom isn't sure. Then they decide to make it a family vacation together.
Over spring break,	Jeremy drives with his mom and dad to the tournament.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeremy is very excited. He talks with his parents about the tournament for the whole drive. • Jeremy's parents talk about all the neat things in the city.
When they get to the hotel,	Jeremy meets many of the other kids who have travelled from all over the country for the tournament.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's fun for him to meet new people. • Some of the kids talk with him about chess but mostly they just talk about normal kid things.
[No Transition]	Jeremy loves the city. He stays up late hanging out with other kids he meets there and doing fun things he doesn't normally do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He loves the restaurants and the big stores downtown. • He stays up way past midnight in the hotel arcade with a group of friends he's just made.
The next day,	Jeremy loses all his games at the tournament, decides to quit playing chess completely, and give up his dream of being world champion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's too tired to play very well and he's really nervous. • He's shocked that he's playing so badly and sad that he's losing. • He leaves that afternoon without staying for the awards ceremony.